This is an appropriate Gospel Reading for the Sunday following the Canonization of Mother Teresa. It was a joy to celebrate Mother Teresa in St. Peter’s Square with a delegation from our parish last weekend. We celebrated mass in a number of churches during the week as a group to celebrate Mother Teresa’s life. We also brought the book of intercessions from our parish with us so this was also an opportunity to pray for your intentions, which we did while we were there. This Gospel Reading is appropriate because Jesus is sharing with us what kind of forgiveness and love we can expect from our Father in heaven. His youngest son egregiously sinned against him, asking for his inheritance before the father was dead, squandered his inheritance in a distant country on a life of dissipation, and suffers as a result of his actions. What kind of forgiveness can he expect from his father? The kind of love and joy we see from the father in the story when receiving his son back into his arms is unthinkable to the people listening to this story. I believe that many listening to this story in Jesus’ time, and perhaps in our times as well, would have a measure of sympathy for the elder son’s protest. Nevertheless, what kind of love can we expect from our Father in heaven? Jesus suggests it is the love of a father who is blind in his love for his wayward son.

This is an appropriate Gospel reading following the Canonization of Mother Teresa because, just as the story of the prodigal son shows us the face of our merciful Father in heaven, the life of Mother Teresa shows us the face of our loving and merciful God as well. And she had her critics too, as we all know. Any story about the Prodigal Son would be incomplete without the presence of the elder brother. Nevertheless the life of Mother Teresa challenges us to be merciful and loving to everyone, especially the poor and suffering. Mother Teresa could see the face of Jesus in everyone she met and calls us to do the same.

Pope Francis preached a beautiful homily last Sunday in celebration of Saint Teresa of Calcutta. The following is an excerpt of what he said at the Canonization mass. He shared with us,

“Following Jesus is a serious task, and, at the same time, one filled with joy; it takes a certain daring and courage to recognize the divine Master in the poorest of the poor and those who are cast aside, and to give oneself in their service. In order to do so, volunteers, who out of love of Jesus serve the poor and the needy, do not expect any thanks or recompense; rather they renounce all this because they have discovered true love. And each one of us can say: ‘Just as the Lord has come to meet me and has stooped down to my level in my hour of need, so too do I go to meet him, bending low before those who have lost faith or who live as though God did not exist, before young people without values or ideals, before families in crisis, before the ill and the imprisoned, before refugees and immigrants, before the weak and defenseless in body and spirit, before abandoned children, before the elderly who are on their own. Wherever someone is reaching out, asking for a
helping hand in order to get up, this is where our presence – and the presence of
the Church which sustains and offers hope – must be’. And I do this, keeping
alive the memory of those times when the Lord’s hand reached out to me when I
was in need.

Mother Teresa, in all aspects of her life, was a generous dispenser of divine
mercy, making herself available for everyone through her welcome and defense of
human life, those unborn and those abandoned and discarded. She was committed
to defending life, ceaselessly proclaiming that ‘the unborn are the weakest, the
smallest, the most vulnerable’. She bowed down before those who were spent, left
to die on the side of the road, seeing in them their God-given dignity; she made
her voice heard before the powers of this world, so that they might recognize their
guilt for the crime – the crimes! – of poverty they created. For Mother Teresa,
mercy was the ‘salt’ which gave flavor to her work, it was the ‘light’ which shone
in the darkness of the many who no longer had tears to shed for their poverty and
suffering.

Her mission to the urban and existential peripheries remains for us today an
eloquent witness to God’s closeness to the poorest of the poor. Today, I pass on
this emblematic figure of womanhood and of consecrated life to the whole world
of volunteers: may she be your model of holiness! I think, perhaps, we may have
some difficult in calling her ‘Saint Teresa’: her holiness is so near to us, so tender
and so fruitful that we continue to spontaneously call her ‘Mother Teresa’. May
this tireless worker of mercy help us increasingly to understand that our only
criterion for action is gratuitous love, free from every ideology and all obligations,
offered freely to everyone without distinction of language, culture, race or
religion. Mother Teresa loved to say, ‘Perhaps I don’t speak their language, but I
can smile’. Let us carry her smile in our hearts and give it to those whom we meet
along our journey, especially those who suffer. In this way, we will open up
opportunities of joy and hope for our many brothers and sisters who are
discouraged and who stand in need of understanding and tenderness.”

Pope Francis offers us great wisdom in appreciating the life of Mother Teresa
who we now we celebrate as Saint Teresa. At the beginning of Mass we processed a
primary relic, a small snip of her hair, which her Order the Missionaries of Charity gifted
to us. This weekend we will have the opportunity to venerate her relic after mass. When
we do so, let us call to mind the parable of the prodigal son, our Gospel reading this
Sunday. Jesus gave us three characters to consider, the wayward son, the elder brother
and the merciful love of the father. We have the opportunity today to ask ourselves who
are we in this story? As we contemplate the life of Mother Teresa, we are all moved to
more closely reflect the love of the heavenly father who mercifully gave us his Son for
the sake of our salvation.